



U.S. Vital Records Overview

This class is designed to provide patrons with a basic understanding of U.S. vital records, including the various types of records, the civil jurisdictions that have responsibilities for the records, and the regional differences in the availability of those records.

Importance of Vital Records

Civil governments have created records of births, marriages, and deaths. Records containing this information are commonly called “vital records,” because they refer to critical events in a person’s life. These are the most important documents for genealogical research, but the births, marriages, and deaths of many people have never been recorded by civil authorities. *Normally* a vital record is recorded at or near the time of the event.

General Historical Background

The practice of recording civil vital statistics developed slowly in the United States. Early vital information was sometimes recorded in brief entries in register books until the twentieth century, when it became more common to create certificates. Some town clerks in colonial America (especially New England) recorded vital information, but these records are incomplete. The federal government has not registered vital records, except for some Americans born outside the country who were recorded in embassy or consulate records.

Records of marriage were generally the first vital records kept in a locality. In most states, the counties or towns began recording marriages as soon as they were established. Whether the marriage ceremony was performed by a civil or church authority, local laws required the marriage to be recorded in civil records. Exceptions were sometimes made, however.

The local health departments of a few large cities began recording births and deaths by the mid-1800s. The early records are usually incomplete. Many counties in the East and Midwest were recording births and deaths by the late 1800s.

Each state eventually developed its own laws and created a statewide registration system. Unfortunately, these records do not exist until the early 1900s in most states. Local offices did not always comply immediately with the registration laws. Within 20 years after registration laws were enacted, most states were recording at least 90 percent of the births and deaths.

Regional Differences

New England: These states have kept good vital records. The town clerks kept register books as early as the 1600s. Most of these states have statewide indexes of the existing records. Most New England states began statewide registration of births, marriages, and deaths between 1841 and 1897. Vermont began centralized registration in 1919, but individual town records go back to the 1700s. Except for New Hampshire (which began recording marriages as early as 1640), many New England marriages in colonial times were not recorded because of the laws and religious customs of the region.

Middle-Atlantic: It is unusual to find any vital records before 1881 for New York and 1885 for Pennsylvania, except in the larger cities. All the states began statewide registration of births and deaths between 1878 and 1915. Statewide registration of marriages began between 1847 and 1906. New Jersey and Delaware have marriage records dating from the 1660s (or the creation of the counties), but systematic recording of marriages in New Jersey did not begin until 1795.

South: In the southern states, laws for civil registration of births and deaths were enacted between 1899 and 1919. Marriages were a legal contract which involved property rights, so the counties recorded them carefully, starting in the early 1700s (except in South Carolina where they began in 1911). Most states initiated statewide marriage files between 1911 and 1962. Virginia counties began recording births, marriages, deaths in 1853, but stopped between 1896 and 1912. Church vital records often date back into the 1700s.

Midwest: Government officials in the Midwestern states began files of births and deaths as early as the 1860s in many counties. Statewide registration of births and deaths was initiated between 1880 and 1920. Officials began recording marriage dates as soon as each county was established and generally began statewide registration between 1880 and 1962.

West: The western states vary greatly in their registration of vital records due to their different settlement patterns. Most area began statewide registration of births and deaths between 1903 and 1920. While most counties were keeping marriage records by 1890, or the date the county was created, statewide registration generally began between 1905 and 1978. Hawaii's records of births, marriages, and deaths start as early as the 1840s.

Birth Records

Birth records generally give the child's name, sex, date and place of birth, and the names of the parents. Records of the twentieth century provide additional details such as the name of the hospital, birthplace of parents, occupation of the parents, marital status of the mother, and the number of other children born to the mother.

If no record was filed at the time of an individual's birth, he may have arranged for a *delayed registration of birth* by showing proof of his birth as recorded in a Bible, school, census, or church record, or by testimony from a person who witnessed the birth. These

registrations generally start in 1937, yet the birth may have occurred many years earlier. The registration is usually in the state where the birth occurred. The Family History Library has acquired copies of many delayed certificates, especially for the Midwestern states.

Marriage Records

Marriages were usually recorded by the clerk of the town or county where the bonds or licenses were issued (generally where the bride resided). You may find records that show a couple's intent to marry and records of the actual marriage.

Records of Intention to Marry

Various records may have been created that show a couple's intent to marry.

Banns and Intentions: were made a few weeks before a couple planned to marry. The couple may have been required to announce their intentions in order to give other community members the opportunity to raise objections to the marriage. This was a rather common custom in the southern and New England States through the mid-1800s.

Banns were a religious custom in which the couple announced to their local congregation that they planned to marry. They may have also posted a written notice at the church. *Intentions* were written notices presented to the local civil authority and posted in a public place for a given period of time. The minister or town clerk recorded these announcements in a register, or you may find them interfiled with other town or church records.

Marriage bonds: are written guarantees or promises of payment made by the groom or another person (often a relative of the bride) to ensure that a forthcoming marriage would be legal. The person who posted the bond was known as surety or bondsman. The bond was presented to the minister or official who would perform the ceremony. The bond was then returned to the town or county clerk. These documents were frequently used in the southern and middle-Atlantic states up to the mid-1800s.

Applications and licenses: are the most common types of records showing intent to marry. These gradually replaced the use of banns, intentions, and bonds. A bride and groom obtained a *license* to be married by applying to the proper civil authorities, usually a town or county clerk. These records have the most information of genealogical value, including the couple's names, ages, and residence. Later records also provide their race, birth dates, occupations, and usually the names of the parents. The license was presented to the person who performed the marriage and was later returned to the town or county clerk. *Applications* for a license are primarily a twentieth century record. These often contain more detailed information than the license.

Records of Marriages

In most cases it can be assumed that the couple married a short time after announcing their intent, even though you may not find proof of the actual marriage. A minister, justice of the peace, military officer, a ship captain, or state official could legally marry a couple. You may find the following records that document the actual marriage.

Certificates: The individual who performed the ceremony or the civil office where it was recorded may have given the couple a certificate of marriage. This may be in the possession of the family. The clerk of the court may have a copy.

Returns and Registers: Town and county clerks generally recorded the marriages they performed in a register or book. If the marriage was performed by someone else, such as a minister or justice of the peace, that person was required to report, or “return,” the marriage information to the town or county clerk. This information may have been reported in writing or verbally, or more frequently, the official recorded the event on the license or bond and returned this document to the clerk. For this purpose, many licenses and bonds were printed with a separate section of the document designated as the “return.”

The information on the *return* usually included the names of the couple, the date and place of the marriage, and the name of the person who performed the marriage.

Twentieth-century returns often add the residence of the couple, the names of the parents or witnesses, and the certificate number.

The town or county clerk recorded (“registered”) the marriage returns in a separate *register* or book, although you may find some early returns in court or town minutes and deed books. He may also have written on the license or the bond the date he registered the marriage.

Twentieth-century marriages are still registered by the county or town, but most states now require the counties to report the marriage to the state office of vital records. Many counties keep duplicates of the records they send to the state.

Death Records

Death records are especially helpful because they may provide important information on a person's birth, spouse, and parents. Some researchers look first for death records because there are often death records for persons who have no birth or marriage records.

Early death records, like cemetery records, generally give the name, date, and place of death. Twentieth-century certificates usually include the age or date of birth (and sometimes the place), race, length of residence in the county or state, cause of death, name of hospital and funeral home, burial information, and the informant's name (often a relative). They often provided the name of a spouse or parents. Since 1950, social security numbers are given on most death certificates. Birth and other information in a death record may not be accurate because the informant may not have had complete information.

Death certificates may be filed in the state where an individual died and the state where he is buried.

Locating Vital Records

Records at the Family History Library

The Family History Library has copies of many vital records, primarily before 1950.

However, if a record was never kept, was not available in the courthouse at the time of microfilming, was not microfilmed, or is restricted from public access by the laws of the state, the Family History Library *does not have a copy*. You may use the records at the library for your family research, but the library does not issue or certify certificates for living or deceased individuals.

To find out what records are available, do a “Place-names” search in the Family History Library Catalog for a particular state, county, or town, and then look under the topic “Vital Records.”

Locating Records not at the Family History Library

Birth, marriage, and death records may be obtained by contacting or visiting state offices of vital records or the appropriate clerk’s office in a town or county courthouse. Genealogical societies, historical societies, and state archives may also have copies or transcripts. To protect the rights of privacy of living persons, most modern records have restrictions on their use and access.

Current addresses and fees for obtaining vital records are easily obtained from the Internet.

Where to Write for Vital Records: Births, Deaths, Marriages, and Divorces is available from the National Center for Health Statistics at: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/w2w.htm>

Vital record ordering information is also available from the following websites: www.vitalrec.com and <http://www.vitalchek.com>. Vitalcheck.com will assist you in obtaining a vital record for a fee in addition to the cost of the record.

The following website provides links to websites (some of which are subscription sites) that provide information regarding birth and marriage records for all the states: *Online Birth & Marriage Records Indexes for the USA: A genealogy guide for finding vital records*. The website address is: <http://www.germanroots.com/vitalrecords.html>

A companion site for death records is entitled: *Online Searchable Death Indexes and Records: A genealogy guide*. It includes obituaries, cemeteries, and the Social Security Death Index. The website address is: <http://www.deathindexes.com/>

Several vital record collections are available online through the *Historical Records Collections* at *FamilySearch*. The majority of these collections consist of both searchable indexes and digital images. The *FamilySearch* record collections can be accessed at the following website address: <http://www.familysearch.org>

A website maintained by “The Family History Research Group” (a commercial genealogy company) is called *ProGenealogists*. It provides links to vital records and indexes as well as cemetery sites. Some of the links are to subscription sites. They also provide links to the states in *USGenWeb*. Many genealogical and historical societies maintain databases with vital record information. These websites can usually be obtained through the state and county links in *USGenWeb*. The U.S. website link to *ProGenealogists* is: <http://www.progenealogists.com/genealogysleuthb.htm>

Ancestry.com is a subscription website that contains hundreds of vital record databases, mostly indexes that can lead you to obtaining a copy of the actual record. Their website is: www.ancestry.com.